

Elizabeth J. Hannigan. Current Records Management Challenges at North Carolina State Agencies & UNC System Campuses. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in I.S degree. April, 2017. 48 pages. Advisor: Helen Tibbo.

This study describes the results of interviews with eleven Chief Records Officers at North Carolina state agencies and University of North Carolina System campuses. The interviews were conducted to identify records management challenges and factors influencing public records management at these institutions.

The interviews revealed that timely records disposition and electronic records management were the two most common records management challenges. Additional factors influencing records management were employees' level of records management knowledge, the role and responsibilities of the Chief Records Officer and the level of legal and institutional support the records management programs received. Overall, Chief Records Officers believed they had strong records management programs and adhered to the instructions of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.

#### Headings:

Public records

Government agency records

Universities & colleges -- archives

Records retention

Electronic records

CURRENT RECORDS MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES AT NORTH CAROLINA  
STATE AGENCIES AND UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SYSTEM  
CAMPUSES

by  
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A Master's paper submitted to the faculty  
of the School of Information and Library Science  
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in  
Information Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

April 2010

Approved by

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Good records management is an important initiative for government agencies. Under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), agencies have a legal obligation to properly manage and store records so they can be made available upon public request. There are additional legal statutes governing how long certain types of records must be kept or destroyed. Records are an important source of organizational knowledge, providing evidence of decisions or work processes that can serve as valuable reference materials. Records also serve an important historical purpose, documenting the history of public organizations.

North Carolina public organizations are required to comply with public records laws dictating how their records must be managed (N.C. General Statute 132-1). It is the responsibility of each public organization to adhere to their records schedule and make sure records are managed correctly. Records management is overseen by a Chief Records Officer appointed by organizational leadership. One of the primary records management responsibilities of Chief Records Officers is overseeing adherence to records schedules. Records retention schedules and disposition (destruction) schedules are used to govern the records of North Carolina state agencies and the public universities in the University of North Carolina (UNC) System. These schedules provide a list of the different categories or record series that define how records should be sorted and how long they should be kept before disposal. The State Record Center at the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources has developed a general records schedule to manage basic types of records created by North Carolina state agencies. A separate general schedule was created for the public colleges and universities in the University of North Carolina System. State agencies and universities can also create individual records schedule to manage the unique types of records that may not be covered by the general schedule. This research paper seeks to understand: what do Chief Records Officers at North

Carolina state agencies and UNC System universities perceive as challenges to records management?

## **Literature Review**

A wide range of previous research has been conducted on records management in a government context. These studies have identified the primary benefits public organizations can reap from good recordkeeping as well as the risks presented by inadequate records. They have also explored the barriers to good recordkeeping.

### **The Significance of Government Records Management**

A strong records management program is important for good governance. Bruce Dearstyne explored this relationship in his book *Managing Government Records and Information*. The book provides a broad overview of the primary issues related to records management. Dearstyne discussed the benefits of records management, the consequences of poor records management and identified factors influencing the success of records programs.

Dearstyne outlined the primary benefits of good records management as:

- It can support the administration of government as well as support the delivery of services to the people.
- It can also document the activities of government, providing support for the people's rights and responsibilities.
- It plays the important role of providing legal documentation and providing evidence of government work.
- It can also provide information that facilitates government research (Dearstyne, 2).
- Records also provide transparency and accountability for government policies and decision-making and can serve as historical context about the government.

Poor records management may prevent agencies from accessing vital information in a timely manner, creating inefficiency and wasted resources. Inadequate records

management can also block policy development and decision-making, which require “up-to-date, appropriate, well-presented information as a basis for considering and analyzing issues and problems” (Dearstyne, 42). Without a strong records management program, governments may not be able to provide vital services requiring the use of information from records.

In addition, records often have legal requirements and poorly maintained or inaccessible records will put the government at legal risk. Dearstyne writes, “poor recordkeeping will leave a thin, inconsistent, or confused source for retrospective policy analysis, study of the government, and historical analysis of the information it assembled on the people and communities it served and other topics of social, political, economic or other importance” (Dearstyne, 43).

### **Factors Influencing Government Records Management**

Dearstyne identified factors that may contribute to a poor or ineffective records management program. One of these conditions was the amount of investment in and resources dedicated to records management. He claimed records management programs are often underdeveloped, underfunded or marginalized by leadership. Dearstyne contended, “legislators and executives, faced with demands for more or better services at a time of shrinking or static revenues, are likely to see records issues as less critical than supporting quality education, providing a welfare safety net for people who need it, clearing snow, replacing decaying bridges, filling potholes and addressing public safety concerns through adequate police services” (Dearstyne, 41). Many government officials believe records are not a pressing issue compared to other more visible government

initiatives. Limited resources and support from leadership make it difficult to establish a strong records management program.

Dearstyne also cited employee knowledge as an important factor for good records management and identified five primary records management responsibilities held by employees. First, employees must be aware of and understand the records management procedures and policies. Second, employees must understand and adhere to their personal responsibilities in regards to records they created or received during the course of government business. Third, employees require appropriate resources including, “access to the tools, procedures, education and advisory services and expertise they [need] to ensure their recordkeeping responsibilities are carried out in a thorough and competent manner” (Dearstyne, 39). Fourth, employees must have the ability to retrieve the appropriate records when they are needed. Fifth, employees must understand the policies and procedures for the retention and disposition of records. Dearstyne asserted employees who do not understand and adhere to these five management responsibilities are incapable of handling records appropriately.

In 2000, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) conducted a study examining recordkeeping and records management practices among United States federal agencies. The study collected qualitative information about the perceptions of federal employees on records creation, maintenance, use and disposition (Sprehe et al, 290). NARA collected print and email survey responses from 500 federal employees working in 150 different federal agencies. The survey specifically targeted records officers, records liaisons, legal staff, information technology staff, Chief Information Officers and process staff. The study also conducted focus groups with employees from

18 federal agencies. The study identified four situational factors that may affect how federal employees view recordkeeping and records management: 1) institutional context, 2) policies and guidance, 3) resources, and 4) other factors.

The findings established a link between institutional context and the value leadership and employees placed on handling records. Agencies with legal recordkeeping requirements, those who maintained case files and those who handled a large number of FOIA requests often developed stronger records management processes. The risk of “adverse legal judgements, unwanted legislation, and/or public embarrassment”, motivated agencies to ensure this information was handled securely. The nature of the records also influenced the strength of record keeping. Records that were clearly defined or unambiguous were easier to manage while records management systems often struggled when employees were unsure what constituted a record.

Another aspect of institutional context that may affect record keeping is organizational culture and leadership. The study claimed, “agencies and organizations in which employees strongly believe in the importance of recordkeeping to the mission of the agency or organization and more importantly, see the link between their own jobs and the successful performance of the mission are more likely to perform good [recordkeeping]” (Sprehe et al., 297). On the other hand, cultures where employees were reluctant to use and share information had poorer recordkeeping systems.

The second factor that influenced recordkeeping and records management was if records management policies and guidelines were integrated into the business processes of the agency. Comprehensive records management policies are the basis of any records program. These policies must be incorporated into the structure and work practices of the



organization or they will not be adopted by employees. A responsive relationship with NARA was seen as being vital to help agencies integrate NARA's policies into their daily work. The study hypothesized that a well-trained Chief Records Officer could serve as a bridge implementing NARA policies in a manner that matched organizational context. Employee knowledge was also a critical factor; agency employees needed "an awareness of the [records management] policies and procedures and [needed to] consciously follow the procedures" (Sprehe et al, 298).

Records retention schedules are one of the most important policies governing recordkeeping. Records schedules organize records into categories and denote how long they should be kept before being disposed. The study emphasized that schedules must reflect the context, processes and needs of the agency. It found "the degree to which agencies' disposition practices are consistent with their schedules appears to be related to the degree to which their schedules are consistent with their business needs for records" (Sprehe et al, 300). Agencies whose records schedules closely fit the business practices of the organization were more likely to adhere to the schedule.

The level of resources devoted to records management also contributed to the success of records programs. Resources included administrative support, the presence of adequate records staff to develop policies and procedures, and financial support such as adequate funding for records management trainings and technologies to improve recordkeeping. The study also emphasized the importance of keeping records staff a part of the business and decision making processes. When records staff were an important part of the organization, employees were more likely to view records management as an important initiative. Visible records staff also increased employees' overall

recordkeeping and records management knowledge. An additional finding was investing in electronic records management (ERM) solutions may lead agencies to pay more attention to their overall records management practices.

The study concluded by underlining the importance of studying the factors influencing recordkeeping among federal agencies. Understanding these factors allowed NARA to target resources towards creating records management trainings, tools and processes to combat these challenges.

The studies by Dearstyne and NARA identified three recurring factors that influenced government records management: institutional context, policies and practices and level of resources. Additional studies have delved more deeply into these three conditions and their potential effect on records management.

### ***Institutional Context***

The institutional context of a government agency can influence the success of their records management programs. An organization's institutional context includes the nature of records and the way they are used by employees used to support work practices within the organization. It is important that records managers have an in-depth understanding of their organization when developing records management policies. Fiorella Foscorini writes, "one of the most critical tasks of records managers in organizations, [is] to get an adequate understanding of what goes on around them in terms of business activities, work practices, technology adaptations, and any other element constituting the context where records are made, captured, used, modified and selectively retained" (Foscarini, 403).

Organizational culture is an important component of institutional context.

Organizational culture is “the basic underlying assumptions and these taken for granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts and feelings” that are shared by employees at an organization. The predominant organizational culture can affect how employees value information and records management. Employees who view records management as important to their work have been found to be more likely to adhere to records management policies (Savard, 16).

Keith Gregory explored the effects of organizational context on records management among public sector agencies in the article “Implementing an electronic records management system: A public sector case study”. Gregory conducted a case study examining the process of implementing a new electronic records management system at the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency, a government agency in the United Kingdom. The study examined the how the agency selected, established, and evaluated the new system and identified a series of lessons learned from the process.

Gregory asserted organizational context and culture were extremely important in records management. He felt there could be no rigid, standardized process for managing records as “each organization has a different set of wants and needs and a different set of cultures on which those wants and needs are acting” (Gregory, 81). The organizational culture within the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency influenced how employees viewed information. Many of the employees were professionals within the field and the specialized nature of their work led to a silo mentality that influenced how information was shared and preserved. These different working styles made it difficult to establish policies and procedures to implement the new system.

Gregory also discussed the challenges of implementing the new records management system and adherence to new records management workflows. He felt it must be mandatory for employees to use a new system. Gregory claimed, “if people are given the option of using it or carrying on the way they have always worked, they will never ever choose to work differently. They will always prefer to carry on the way they have always worked. A mixture of persuasion and compulsion is needed to get people to use the system- both carrots and sticks” (Gregory, 84). Gregory addressed the difficulties of training users on a new records management system and suggested that “super-users” could be trained beforehand to assist their peers with the system during the training session.

Gregory’s findings underscore the relationship between understanding organizational culture and records management in the public sector. It is difficult to teach people new skills and “get people to think, act and work differently” (Gregory, 84). Records managers must be able to clearly explain the purposes of records management and the specific responsibilities of employees within the records management system.

### ***Policies and Guidelines***

Sufficient records management policies and guidelines are another component of good records management programs. The primary purpose of records management policies is to clarify primary recordkeeping principles and specify the recordkeeping responsibilities of each employee. Previous studies have found that government organizations who did not have policies or whose policies were poorly designed struggled to follow good records management. Proscovia Svard found without a records management policy, employees within a Belgian municipal agency were confused as to

their recordkeeping responsibilities. She concluded, “lack of clear guidelines or knowledge about the laws that govern records retention ought [created] insecurity in appraising and destroying information/records” (Svard, 14). The lack of guidelines decreased employee’s confidence in their recordkeeping abilities and this led to records being retained indefinitely. Policies and guidelines provide employees with the blueprint they need to follow good records management practices.

Records management policies in government agencies were further examined by Umi Asma’ Mokhtar and Zawiyah Mohammad Yusof in the article “Electronic records management in the Malaysian public sector: the existence of policy”. The study collected quantitative data on the existence of electronic records management policies in Malaysian government departments as well as qualitative data about employee perceptions of the policies. These impressions were tested using a questionnaire distributed to 25 different government agencies (Mokhtar and Yusof, 236).

The study findings indicated respondents believed policies and guidelines were important in managing electronic records. Thirty percent of respondents working in government departments that lacked electronic records management policies believed their departments needed policies immediately, while only 10% were unbothered by a lack of policy. The study also found that the existence of a policy did not guarantee its implementation. (Mokhtar and Yusof, 241). Time-constraints, policies that were difficult to follow and inability to understand policies were also identified as deterrents to adequate records management.

### ***Level of Resources***

The level of resources dedicated to records management is another factor that may influence the success of records management programs. Agencies need financial support and resources dedicated to developing strong records management policies, employee training and investing in electronic records infrastructure.

The article, “Managing records as a strategic resource in the government ministries of Tanzania” examined records management practices and how records were used to foster accountability within the Tanzanian government. The study surveyed 120 registry personnel from 20 government ministries, which represented 95% of all government ministries in Tanzania. The study also conducted interviews with 26 senior government leaders and all five employees of the Records and Archives Management department. The primary objective was to determine the strategies used to manage government records and assess the level of skill and training of records managers.

One of the key findings of the study was the importance of having adequate resources to manage records. The study posed, “funding is key to formulating and implementing effective and efficient records and archival services. The existence of progressive and comprehensive legislation is not likely to bring about any positive changes in the management of public records unless resources to implement the laws are made available” (Ndenje-Sichalwe et al, 268). When asked if they felt their level of funding was adequate, 84.6% of respondents answered negatively. Programs needed adequate financial support for “enacting records management policies and preparing manuals, training registry personnel, developing and implementing a disaster management programme, environmental control and monitoring appraisal and disposition programmes” (Ndenje-Sichalwe et al, 269). Ndenje-Sichalwe recommended that

government ministries receive a dedicated budget and that funding should include designated initiatives such as employee education and training.

### **Records Management at Public Universities**

Public universities have many of the same public records management responsibilities as traditional government agencies. The Society of American Archivists has developed guidelines for establishing records management programs within college and university archives (Society of American Archivists). These guidelines define the primary responsibilities of a university archives program as:

- Policy and procedure development
- Records retention and disposition programs
- Data collection/forms management
- Active records management
- Inactive records management
- Training and outreach programs

The guidelines also highlight the importance of creating strong organizational relationships with other campus departments to help gain institutional support for records management (Society of American Archivists). In addition to these guidelines, scholarly research has addressed the development of records management programs at public universities, the structure of these programs and the challenges they may face.

In 1990, Don C. Skemer and Geoffrey P. Williams surveyed records management programs at colleges and universities in the United States. Prior to the work of Skemer and Williams, there had been limited research dedicated to examining university records management programs or the relationship between records management and university

archival programs (Skemer and Williams, 534). The study surveyed 1500 college and universities about the structure of their records management programs. Participants were also asked to evaluate their records management programs and activities (Skemer and Williams, 537).

Skemer and Williams found over half of the campuses surveyed had archivists serving a dual role as records managers. However, only fourteen respondents had their records management role officially included within their job title. Skemer and Williams questioned how participants serving in this dual role would balance the responsibilities of both archives and records management. They found “many records managers, hard pressed by other responsibilities reported being able to do no more than send an annual reminder memorandum and hope for some level of compliance with the schedules” (Skemer and Williams, 540). In addition to time constraints, Skemer and Williams also raised concerns that the mindset of archivists was used focusing on records with historical significance and may not be conducive to managing administrative records. They felt unless archivists truly had a vested interest in dealing with administrative records management, these programs would remain weak.

Skemer and Williams found that 75% of respondents with records management programs came from publicly supported colleges and universities with legal records management requirements (Skemer and Williams, 537). When asked why records management programs were instituted, “state legal mandates or records management requirements were cited almost as often as the expected institutional desire for better archives, improved records retrieval and savings of space and filing equipment” (Skemer and Williams, 537). However, participants reported that legal mandates were not enough



to ensure compliance with records management programs. They felt unless programs were supported by key administrators who advocated for following public records laws, records management would not be successful (Skemer and Williams, 545).

Overall, Skemer and Williams found that participants believed their records management program were strong. They cited better archival documentation, improved access to records, and improved uses of space and resources as primary benefits of their records management programs. Participants were also asked to describe what they viewed as barriers to records management. Some of the most common challenges were “the sheer volume of records generated, inadequate campus and state support, low priority for records management, weak policies and outdated schedules, lack of compliance and cooperation, the survival of single-office records management programs and the inability to deal with automated records” (Skemer and Williams, 542). Many of the concerns identified by Skemer and Williams were echoed by subsequent research.

Marjorie Rabe Barrit conducted further studies into the challenges of implementing records management programs at colleges and universities. While working to develop a records management program at the University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library, Barrit surveyed 12 peer-institutions to gather information on their records management programs (Barrit, 7). She found the development of comprehensive university records management programs lagged behind programs at state and federal government archives. Barrit’s findings reinforced the importance of public records laws and mandates to enforce records management programs. In 1987, many public universities were not incorporated into state records management systems and had to rely on mandates from their governing boards (Barrit, 8). Without this authority, it was

difficult to conduct comprehensive records surveys or develop and implement records schedule (Barrit, 8).

Barrit also found lack of institutional support made it difficult for universities to have the resources they needed to develop records management programs. They struggled from a lack of resources and with staff who struggled to find time to devote to records management among their other responsibilities. Despite these challenges, Barrit concluded colleges and universities should adopt records management practices wherever possible and adapt them to the needs of their institution.

Lisl Zach and Marcia Frank Peri explored how North American colleges and universities managed electronic records. Their study examined patterns in the process colleges and universities used to manage e-records or electronic “administrative records, digital assets, email, institutional publications, and websites” (Zach and Peri, 110). Zach and Peri found that many colleges and universities had not developed formal processes for managing electronic records. In surveys conducted in both 2005 and 2009, they found that only 49.7% of the 193 institutions they surveyed had or were planning a formal electronic records management (ERM) program. Even among institutions with formal ERM programs, approximately half did not have a formal position dedicated to records management (Zach and Peri, 111). The study also asserted institutions needed to have a basic records management program before they could develop solutions for electronic records (Zach and Peri, 118).

Zach and Peri found institutional support was a key factor for creating electronic records management programs. Campus leaders needed to believe records management important and be willing to dedicate resources to preserving records. Zach and Peri

wrote, “forming strategic alliances with key stakeholders outside the library is essential for success, so archivists and records managers should begin by building relationships/teams with others in the college or university setting” (Zach and Peri, 122). Key stakeholders included the campus president, provosts, and department heads. A strong relationship with Information Technology departments was also seen as extremely important as these departments were often responsible for selecting and administering electronic records management systems.

The study concluded that there was a disconnect between the archival and records management needs of colleges and universities and the ability to collect and preserve digital materials. While there was no uniform solution for developing an electronic records management program, a successful program requires support and collaboration between libraries and other campus leaders.

Overall, public universities faced many of the same benefits and challenges as government agencies in establishing records management programs. In both contexts, legal public records requirements were the primary motivation for developing records management programs. Factors such as institutional support, authority and level of resources were found to influence the success of records management programs.

## **Research Question**

Previous research has identified a number of factors that may influence the success of records management programs. However, the majority of attention has been paid to record keeping at the United States federal government and among international governments. There have been fewer studies focusing on records management within United States state government. The differences in records management programs

between government agencies and public universities with similar records management responsibilities is another unexplored area. This study seeks to examine records management programs in the context of North Carolina state government and the North Carolina public university system. What do Chief Records Officers at North Carolina state agencies and the University of North Carolina System perceive as primary records management challenges?

## **Methods**

Interviews were conducted with 11 Chief Records Officers from North Carolina state agencies and University of North Carolina (UNC) System campuses to collect information about public records management. Chief Records Officers are responsible for overseeing the records management programs at their institutions. Their responsibilities include “[coordinating] all agency requests for records assistance, records or other technical training and other offered consultative services with the Government Records Branch of the Department of Cultural Resources” and “[acting] as agency coordinator for all records activities, programs, and reports required by the Department of Cultural Resources in administering the state records management program” (State Archives of North Carolina). The records management responsibilities of Chief Records Officers provided them with a unique perspective on the challenges of managing records within their organizations. An additional interview was conducted with an employee at the State Record Center within the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR) to gather background information about public records management programs.

Participants were recruited from two different populations of Chief Records Officers that have distinct responsibilities and characteristics. However, all participants represented

organizations subject to North Carolina public records laws that define how government

information must be handled. North Carolina General Statute § 132-1 defines public records as:

“all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, photographs, films, sound recordings, magnetic or other tapes, electronic data processing records, artifacts or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance in connection with the transaction of public business by any agency of North Carolina government or its subdivisions. Agency of North Carolina government or its subdivisions shall mean and include every public office, public officer or official (State or local, elected or appointed), institution, board, commission, bureau, council, department, authority, or other unit of government of the State or of any county, unit, special district or other political subdivision of the government” (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 132-1).

An additional statute, G.S. § 132-8, grants the Department of Natural and Cultural

Resources authority to create a records management program that will determine how records are administered (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 132-8).

The first population selected for the study was Chief Records Officers at North Carolina state agencies. The State Archives of North Carolina describes state agency records officers as “appointed by and [representing] the agency head or public official. Usually the task is assigned as an additional duty to the deputy secretary, a special assistant to the secretary or other department executive with adequate authority and a thorough knowledge of the agency’s mission and the records created by the agency” (State Archives of North Carolina). There are 33 total Chief Records Officers assigned to North Carolina state agencies and the Court System.

The second population selected for the study was Chief Records Officers at University of North Carolina System institutions. The University of North Carolina System encompasses 17 separate campuses that make up North Carolina’s public university system. Each campus has a Chief Records Officer responsible for records management. In the UNC System, the position of Chief Records Officer is often assigned to the University Archivist or located within the Office of General Counsel.

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants from both study populations. Sampling frames were constructed from contact information publicly available on the website of the State Archives of North Carolina. Participants were initially contacted by an email inquiring if they were interested in taking part in the study. Among those who responded to the initial contact email, arrangements were made to schedule an in-person or telephone interview.

The study had a total of eleven participants. Five participants were recruited from state agencies and six participants were from UNC System campuses. Interview methods were used to gather qualitative or non-numerical data. The interview used open-ended questions allowing participants to express their personal impressions and opinions about records management.

Interviews were conducted in-person or over the telephone and lasted roughly 25 minutes. Participants were asked a series of 17 questions assessing their records management responsibilities, practices and what they perceived as the challenges to records management (Appendix A). Questions were intended to address three major themes assessing how 1) institutional context, 2) policies and practices and 3) level of resources could influence records management. The same set of interview questions were used for both populations.

With the participant's permission, interviews were recorded using an audio recorder application on an Android cell phone and interviews were transcribed shortly following the meeting. When interviews could not be recorded, notes were taken to summarize the participant's responses. Steps were taken to preserve participants' anonymity and all references to participant and institution names were removed from the

transcriptions and notes. Audio recordings were destroyed after the transcriptions were completed.

A coding system was developed to categorize participants' responses. The interview transcripts and notes were then coded to identify prevalent themes. The interview themes were then used to classify records management challenges from the perspective of the Chief Records Officers. The analysis also compared the differences between the two study populations to examine differences in the experiences of Chief Records Officers at state agencies and UNC System institutions. The findings were used to gather a preliminary impression of records management at North Carolina public organizations and identify further areas for research.

## **Findings**

The interviews with Chief Records Officers identified two major challenges facing records management at North Carolina state agencies and UNC System institutions. Both populations believed records disposition was the biggest challenge they faced in adhering to records retention schedules. Chief Records Officers believed a lack of knowledge, confidence and uncertainty about how to manage digital records led employees to keep records beyond their disposition date. An additional major challenge was the management of electronic records. Chief Records Officers struggled with updating processes developed for analog records to an electronic environment and dealing with employees who were tentative to make changes. Developing and implementing electronic records management technologies was an additional area of concern.

The interviews also revealed three additional factors that may influence records management. There was also broad agreement that the level of records management knowledge among employees was dictated by their work responsibilities and the extent to which they dealt with records. Records management knowledge tended to be strong among employees who relied on records for administrative purposes or had to adhere to legal requirements for recordkeeping. The levels of experience with records management also differed among Chief Records Officers, influencing how comfortable they were personally dealing with records management issues or if they preferred to defer to experts at the State Record Center.

Level of experience also shaped the roles and responsibilities of Chief Records Officers and their personal involvement in the records management process and employee records management training. Both populations also highlighted the importance of legal authority and the support of organizational leaders when developing and implementing a records management program.

## **Records Disposition**

*“I think adherence to retention is really good. It’s so good that I think some things could be chucked!”*

A consistent theme across all eleven participants was public employees tended to struggle with records disposition. When discussing adherence to their published records retention schedules, Chief Records Officers felt employees were successfully retaining records for the appropriate length of time. However, the CRO’s were much less confident records were destroyed or transferred at the appropriate time. Chief Records Officers from both state agencies and UNC System campuses felt records disposition need



improvement and they cited similar explanations and concerns. Lack of knowledge, confidence, and the format of records were seen as reasons why employees were reluctant to dispose of records.

### ***Knowledge***

A lack of awareness of disposition and good records management practices may be one of the reasons why public employees are not adhering to the records disposition schedule. One participant explained, “I don’t think I’ve encountered any gross negligence, it’s really just a lack of awareness of disposition.” In some cases, Chief Records Officers believed employees were unaware of how they were supposed to destroy records. One participant claimed, “[sometimes] people are unclear, you know. I think sometimes people are hesitant, you have these documents and ‘It says I can destroy them after such and such but can I really do that?’” Employees who did not have knowledge of the procedures and purposes of records disposition were more likely to hold onto records too long.

Another knowledge gap pertained to classifying records and calculating retention periods. One Chief Records Officer explained “typically people hold onto things longer than they really need to and they’re a bit unsure about when they can get rid of things or when something becomes an inactive record. [T]hat can be a little bit of gray area, when something moves from active to inactive.” Employees were uncertain when records were no longer considered “active” and this made it difficult for them to calculate the retention period and ascertain when records should be destroyed. This led them to keep records, rather than risk improperly destroying them.

Participants indicated a potential relationship between records management training and adherence to records disposition. One UNC System Chief Records Officer believed university offices that had undergone records management training or with whom they had relationships, typically adhered to records disposition. “Offices that have either worked with me, [they] at least know there is a schedule and they can look at the schedule to figure out what to keep or what to throw out and when to send it to the archives if it needs to come to the archives.” On the other hand, offices that had not received training were more likely to hold on to records. The participant claimed, “what I’ve found when I go out to offices that haven’t really taken advantage of our program in the past is where they fail isn’t in practice but in disposition. What I tend to find is that they’ve kept records far longer than they’ve needed to.” Increased records management training and contact with Chief Records Officers may give employees the knowledge they need to adhere to records disposition schedules.

### ***Apprehension***

Some Chief Records Officers believed employees were apprehensive about getting rid of records, even when they understood the records disposition schedule. Employees feared negative consequences from getting rid of records and erred on the side of caution by keeping them. Some employees were reluctant to destroy records in case they needed them again. One Chief Records Officer explained, “there’s sometimes a significant attachment to old records when they really aren’t very useful. I think that every institution has that problem...’put it in the closet because someday you might need it again’... that I think all of us have to do better with.”

Others also cited fears that destroying records would hurt institutional memory. They believed they should “maintain things for the next people that come in. I mean, I’m not always going to work here and what’s good for me to be able to get my hands on something easily, I need to think about the paralegal or the Chief Records Officer that’s going to be here in ten years, will they know what to do, will they know where to find information.” There was a sense that it was better to keep things than risk destroying records that would be missed later.

### ***Record Format***

Several Chief Records Officers felt the format of records influenced disposition but did not agree if analog or electronic records presented greater challenges.

One UNC System Chief Records Officer felt their institution tended to retain too many paper records. However, they were optimistic the increasing transition to born-digital records and using digital record keeping systems would improve disposition. They proclaimed, “I think as we move away from the paper record, and into document imaging and online document management more fully, I think we will do more tagging of records and building more retention schedules to function automatically. So I think that’s going to be a place where we need a lot of improvement, I think everyone needs a lot of improvement and I think we’re going to get it.”

For other participants, electronic records presented challenges for their organizations. One Chief Records Officer felt automatic retention capabilities built into electronic records systems created problems for retention. They believed their organization’s policy of automatically backing up and preserving employees’ emails was unnecessary and they could be more judicious in which records they kept indefinitely. “I

personally wish we didn't keep every email because it makes a huge amount of electronic space that gets taken up for many times inconsequential emails and once it's lost value why keep that but we've got systems that catch everything and I think that's a little bit over the top." In this case, the ability to easily maintain a large number of records using electronic systems allowed the organization to avoid disposition.

Another Chief Records Officer felt the number of data security measures employees had to implement due to information sensitivity concerns make them reluctant to get rid of records. "If you're talking about compliance, they've done everything as far as security and controlled access and logging, really where they tend to have a failing, I think because they've put all that in, I think they inherently don't want to destroy it." After taking numerous steps to preserve records, employees were unwilling to then destroy them according to the schedule.

While problems with records disposition were often mentioned as a challenge to good records management, they were viewed as less serious than failing to retain required records. Several Chief Records Officers felt it was better to keep records for longer than necessary than to destroy records too early. One Chief Records Officer at a UNC System school explained, "it is non-compliance but I think the worst non-compliance would be getting rid of things that were permanent or should not have been destroyed." Another Chief Records Officer agreed that it was better to err on the side of caution and felt, "[it's] better to keep than to get rid of, even if it means that you've got a lot of stuff. It's just a good idea to make sure that you keep everything, especially things that are public record." While they acknowledged the potential issues with failing to adhere to disposition schedules, they believed it was the better of the two options and resources

should be focused on making sure employees did not destroy records that needed to be maintained.

## **Electronic Records**

*“How we describe those and what destruction means in that world, how up to date our records schedules are in that regard, I think we’ve got a long way to go there”.*

Beyond disposition, many participants viewed electronic records management as an area where their organizations needed improvement. An increasing amount of public records are being digitized or are born-digital. However, electronic records are more fragile than traditional analog records and may require different records management practices. Chief Records Officers at both state agencies and UNC System institutions voiced similar challenges regarding electronic records management. The two most common concerns involved adapting traditional practices to an electronic environment and the development of new technologies for managing born-digital records.

### ***Updating Practices***

A common concern was updating current records management processes and workflows developed for analog records to meet the needs of digitized and born-digital records. One Chief Records Officer at a state agency felt this was an area of concern for all records management programs. They asserted, “I think all of the state agencies and frankly the State Record Center are dealing with, you know the shift to electronic records. You know some agencies might say that shift happened a decade or more so ago, but we’re still [in a place where] our records schedules tend to describe our paper records pretty comprehensively but our electronic databases not so comprehensively.”

Compatibility issues between practices and policies developed for analog records and the

requirements of digital records, made it difficult for their agency to manage their born digital records. Employees at the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, which is responsible for overseeing public records management, agreed current records schedules were not always suited to born-digital records.

Employees may also have less knowledge or understanding of what constitutes a record in the electronic environment. They may have an easier time conceptualizing records management when applied to paper documents but do not necessarily view born-digital documents as records. One UNC System Chief Records Officer mentioned that employees often did not know their emails were automatically retained by the universities' IT department. They claimed, "I think when people hear things like their emails are all kept, things like that can be a surprise to people." Another Chief Records Officer at a state agency noticed some employees were reluctant to transition from analog to digital processes because they viewed it as difficult and non-intuitive.

Another electronic records management challenge was managing public records created using email and or personal devices. One Chief Records Officer stressed to employees that they needed to conduct all agency business using their official email address so that it would be covered by the required information security and records management processes. They struggled with finding ways to remind employees if they accidentally conducted business using a personal email address, they needed to forward that content their official email address. They had also developed a policy pertaining to public records created using SMS messages or on other personal devices but felt employees often did not realize these messages were classified as public records.

### ***Technology***

New technologies can provide solutions for managing digitized and born-digital records. Organizations using a large number of electronic databases saw opportunities to automatically retain and dispose of electronic records according to the records retention schedule. One Chief Records Officer felt “We’ve made a lot of progress on implementing electronic records workflows, particularly for student services through our Banner extender program. As far as I know only one other UNC school has implemented a formal electronic imaging policy. I think that’s something to be proud of.” However, other Chief Records Officers mentioned difficulties in implementing new electronic records management technologies. One state agency had to take extra steps to ensure the authenticity and integrity of records was maintained due to legal requirements and had to ensure these technologies complied with information security standards. This Chief Records Officer was so concerned with making sure they understood the requirements of electronic records they underwent additional electronic records management training.

Developing these new technologies typically required collaboration with the Information Technology department that may not see records management as a high priority. One Chief Records Officer at a UNC System campus was excited about the development of a new system that would automatically implement retention and disposition to born-digital records within campuses databases. However, they were frustrated with the speed of the development as the IT Department analyzed several different technology options. They explained, “I really wish we had the electronic records management system that our IT department has been working on with different contractors. I really wish that was in place and ready to go and it’s not. And because the software and the management of the actual software and the administration is going to

come out of IT and not out of Archives, I wish that was done and it's not." The implementation of new technologies that may require a large investment of time and resources as well as collaboration between different stakeholders that can be a challenge.

## **Records Management Knowledge**

*"I think that there are some folks who are fairly expert in it, but I think there's lots of folks, again we're a huge agency, that really don't have any knowledge of that in particular".*

The level of records management knowledge among employees may influence adherence to records management. Both state agency and UNC system campus Chief Records Officers felt knowledge of records management procedures and records schedules was highest among employees who dealt with records on a consistent basis. The connection between records and work processes and employees' experience with records were the two primary factors influencing records management knowledge.

## **Work Processes**

Legally all North Carolina public employees are responsible for managing public records. However, there was broad consensus that employees who were required to use and manage records as a part of their typical work responsibilities had a stronger knowledge of records management. One Chief Records Officer at a state agency believed knowledge would only extend to "whatever record they come into contact with and deal with regularly." However, other Chief Records Officers believed employees who consistently needed to manage records had a better overall understanding of records management.

One UNC System Chief Records Officer felt the nature of records that needed to be managed influenced how well employees understood records management. The Chief



Records Officer mentioned, “so I will say that’s one thing I’ve noticed, those that work in the Health Sciences campus have greater background knowledge of records keeping principles, things like disposition schedules and proper destruction practices.” Medical offices had a much stronger grasp of records management issues because they dealt with patient records on a day-to-day basis. Patient records have a number of federal and state restrictions regarding their retention and disposition and were also extremely important to the day-to-day operations of the offices. The legal requirements and administrative importance of these records forced employees to develop strong records management practices. The Chief Records Officer felt academic offices had a much weaker grasp of records management and were “aware of the importance of records, but they tend to be less well versed during initial meetings about how to locate the general schedule, how to interpret aspects of it and things like that.” These offices had a less direct relationship between records and their work processes and their records management practices were less developed.

Other Chief Records Officers echoed the idea that employees who dealt with records developed strong knowledge, while employees who managed records infrequently were more likely to struggle with records management. One participant claimed, “people in the Office of General Counsel or people on the Com staff tend to be more familiar with those processes and procedures and policies. I think that a lot employees within the division, the folks who are performing that regulatory function have a general awareness of public records law and the obligation that all state employees have to maintain records in a manner consistent with the law.” Another state agency

Chief Records Officer believed employees within their office who dealt with records as their primary responsibility displayed a greater desire for records management training.

### ***Experience***

Experience was also cited as a factor influencing records management.

Employees who had been in their positions or with the agency for a long-time had developed an institutional knowledge about how records should be managed. One Chief Records Officer felt, “I guess their knowledge is probably just average, unless they’ve been here a long time and there’s a lot of people who’ve just been working for the department for 20 years or so, and they can pretty much do their jobs with their eyes closed.” However, since this knowledge rested with individual employees, it tended to be lost once they left the agency. One Chief Records Officer mentioned a need to retrain employees in an office that had experienced turnover in personnel, explaining “there’s a lot of offices I’ve worked with before but haven’t heard from in a few years and now I’m talking to them again and they have turnover in personnel so the current personnel really isn’t up to speed with the records retention. So I’ll have to give them training on that.” Another Chief Records Officer felt rising levels of employee turnover among campus positions was making records management more difficult.

The effects of experience on records management knowledge also extended to the Chief Records Officers. Most of the Chief Records Officers within the UNC System campuses had either been trained as professional archivists or had long careers in institutional records management. They were extremely familiar with the principles and practices of records management. On the other hand, at many state agencies Chief Records Officers were appointed from within the legal or administrative departments, and

had less experience with records management. Most of the participants from state agencies had not worked with records management prior to beginning their current positions. Perhaps due to this knowledge gap, Chief Records Officers at state agencies tended to rely more heavily on the expertise of the State Record Center. While participants from UNC System institutions viewed the State Record Center as a valuable resource, they tended to communicate with them less frequently. This level of experience influenced the level of records management knowledge participants had and whether they were comfortable addressing records management issues themselves.

Knowledge may influence employees' abilities to recognize records and correctly adhere to records disposition schedules. Prioritizing records management trainings, either conducted by the Chief Records Officer or with the State Record Center, may be a way to help employees be aware of good records management practices. However, time and resource constraints may make it difficult to conduct widespread training.

Including records management policies and guidelines within employee handbooks may also serve as a useful reference document for employees. While some institutions had records management policies within the department intranet or on their website, some institutions had no records management policies beyond the records retention and disposition schedules. The type of institution didn't appear to affect whether or not they had additional policies. In addition to serving as a reference document, the presence of these guidelines may reinforce the importance of records management.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

*“It’s been difficult and can be time consuming, because it’s a role and a responsibility that’s in addition to your day-to-day activities and it’s not really part of the job description I guess.”*

Differences in experience and training between Chief Records Officers at UNC System campuses and state agencies appeared to shape how they viewed their roles and responsibilities. Chief Records Officers at state agencies seemed to believe compliance was their most important responsibility and focused on fulfilling the requirements and guidelines outlined by the State Record Center. They viewed their role as an intermediary between their agencies and the State Record Center and relied on their expertise to answer employees’ records management questions and conduct records management training.

One Chief Records Officer at a state agency expressed the belief their records management program would be stronger if there was a position specifically devoted to records management. With their other responsibilities there just was not enough time to spend on records management and it tended to fall by the wayside.

“I think it would be beneficial to have an employee or perhaps multiple employees, like one for each division for example, whose sole responsibility is to manage records and to sort of be the agencies liaison to the DNCR. So that is their primary function... Whereas right now it’s sort of a secondary function, both for the Chief Records Officer and for anyone in a particular division who may have been informally assigned the role of being the records officer for that divisions records.

When it’s sort of a secondary responsibility other stuff tends to take priority. But if we had employees whose sole responsibility was records management and records retention, I feel like that would really help us to improve.”

One state agency did have a specific position dedicated to managing records. This position was likely created because records were extremely important to the day-to-day functions of the agency which had legal requirements for ensuring the authenticity and integrity of records. This Chief Records Officer devoted a great deal of time to records

management training including attending records management conferences and completing a records management certificate program. This Chief Records Officer took a more active role in ensuring the records of the agency were managed appropriately and serving as a resource for other employees.

Like that particular Chief Records Officer, UNC System Chief Records Officers typically took a more visible role in the records management process. As trained archivists and records managers, they felt more comfortable conducting records management training and personally answering records management questions. One Chief Records Officer felt outreach to campus departments was a strength of their program and helped them do a “really good job of allowing people to focus on their jobs and trusting us to manage their records.” This level of expertise and trust allowed the records management program to reach more employees and help them become engaged in the records management process.

The role and responsibilities of Chief Records Officers were typically determined by the context and needs of their organization. While it would perhaps be ideal if each organization had a highly trained records manager, that is likely not realistic or necessary for most organizations that are not producing large volumes of complex records. The State Record Center was viewed as a valuable resource to help these agencies conduct training and answer records management questions when necessary.

## **Legal and Organizational Authority**

*“When things come out of Counsel’s office, people tend to listen.”*

Both populations expressed the importance of legal and organizational authority when developing a records management program. One Chief Records Officer at a state agency mentioned that the position had formerly been held by the controller but was transitioned to the Office of General Counsel. They claimed, “prior to me coming here the records were managed by the controller, that’s the person who deals with the accounting and the budgets -things of that nature- [but] there seems to be a pretty big aspect of public records and compliance that goes along with records management so we switched it to the General Counsel when I got here.” This agency viewed records management as a legal responsibility rather than an administrative function. They believed the position should be given to an attorney who had the expertise and authority to ensure records are appropriately managed.

Several Chief Records Officers at UNC System campuses also highlighted the importance of legal authority when implementing a records management program. Even when they had primary responsibility for records management, they believed a strong relationship with the Office of General Counsel was extremely beneficial for enforcing records management. Several Chief Records Officers felt the support from the Office of General Counsel helped them gain institutional support by lending a sense of authority. One Chief Records Officer explained, “one of the benefits of it being driven by Counsel before we got here, is Counsel still has a large voice in it. And when things come out of Counsel’s office, people tend to listen. So that’s been real helpful.”

The support provided by the Office of General Counsel ranged from fulfilling public records requests to helping the Chief Records Officer perform records scheduling and records management training. To reinforce the legal requirements of public records

management, several UNC System institutions included a records management component within mandatory employee legal trainings. These included a segment on records management during a mandatory employee seminar and a records management component during a training on information security regulations. It was believed that presenting records management as a legal requirement, rather than an administrative responsibility, would lead to greater adherence.

Chief Records Officers found it beneficial when records management requirements were codified in state legal statutes and organizational policies. One Chief Records Officer felt the legal authority provided by the public records laws within the North Carolina General Statutes made it much easier to enforce records management. They asserted, “it really helps that we have a mandate from the state and it’s very clearly spelled out within our schedules. And I know the chancellor officially authorized this office to carry out these rules, which is great to have it explicitly stated in the university policy. We can point to that say we’re tasked with carrying out these responsibilities and providing guidance and that makes my job a little bit easier.” The ability to refer back to a legal or policy requirement made it easier to convey the importance of records management and employees were more likely to follow records management practices if they believed there would be consequences if they didn’t.

Both populations also expressed the importance of having organizational support for records management from key leaders within the organization. Chief Records Officers at state agencies felt organizational leadership valued records management, especially when records served an important regulatory or work purpose for the agency. One

participant felt leaders valued records management because it provided them with policies and guidelines to point to when dealing with records requests.

Chief Records Officers at UNC System campuses often evaluated the amount of support they received from leaders in budgetary terms, and if they felt they had the necessary staff and resources to practice good records management. One Chief Records Officer claimed, “the fact that we were able to create a new position in the library for the records analyst shows that at all different levels, up and down the system, people acknowledge that it’s an important role and to expand our personnel in that way I think was a really great thing and shows a commitment to what we’re doing here.” Overall, all of the Chief Records Officers felt they were supported by organizational leadership and that leaders understood the importance of records management even if they were not actively involved or knowledgeable in the process.

Statutory requirements and organizational support are two factors that may make it easier to implement and enforce records management guidelines. These public records laws may also lead public organizations to value and support records management because they want to adhere to the law. This may make it easier for Chief Records Officers to have the resources and authority they need to promote good records management.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored public records management at North Carolina state institutions by conducting semi-structured interviews with Chief Records Officers at North Carolina state agencies and UNC System campuses. Interviews with eleven participants identified timely records disposition and adapting to electronic records



management as the two primary challenges facing public agencies. Employees' records management knowledge, the roles and responsibilities of Chief Records Officers and legal and organizational authority were additional factors found to influence records management. The responses reflected many of the findings identified by previous government records management studies such as institutional context, employee knowledge and the level of resources dedicated to records management. Despite changes in the nature of records produced and the technology used to manage records, it is clear these factors continue to influence records management.

Despite these challenges, the interview results presented an optimistic picture of the state of records management among North Carolina state institutions. All of the Chief Records Officers felt their institutions did a good job fulfilling their records management requirements, although they agreed there was always room for improvement. They tended to believe employees valued records management and understood its legal, administrative and historical purposes, even if they were not well-versed in specific records management processes or terminologies. All of the Chief Records Officers also believed employees were generally adhering to records retention schedules with the caveat that as one Chief Records Officer put it, "we can't police people, we can't go in their offices and police everything they do. So I would say it's just like any other campus- we don't know."

One limitation of the study is it incorporates the opinions of fairly limited sample of Chief Records Officers. Due to recruitment difficulties and time constraints, interviews were conducted with only 5 of the 33 Chief Records Officers at state agencies and 6 of the 17 Chief Records Officers at UNC System campuses. While many potential

participants simply did not respond to recruitment emails, those who specifically declined to participate in the study typically cited a lack of knowledge and experience with records management or believed their records management responsibilities were too minor to merit discussion.

The time the study was conducted may have influenced the availability of participants, especially among state agencies. The study was conducted during a transition period following the election of a new governor, which created additional responsibilities and uncertainties for state agencies. Staff turnover and new appointments may have created many new Chief Records Officers who were inexperienced and not comfortable discussing records management at the time of the study. Others may have simply been too busy to respond and take the time for interviews. If the position of Chief Records Officer at state agencies was assigned to a records professional, it might limit the effects of turnover and ensure the agency always had a Chief Records Officer with a strong understanding of records management and the agency's records. Due to the small sample size there may have been perspectives and opinions about public records management that could not be included in the study.

An additional study limitation is that it was conducted just prior to a change in records scheduling and procedures at both North Carolina state agencies and UNC System campuses. The North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources is currently working on shifting to a functional scheduling approach. Functional analysis was described by an employee of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources as, "looking at state government holistically and looking at the main functions of state government and then tying that to the main functions of a particular agency." The new

functional scheduling approach will create a general schedule for functions of government common to all state agencies such as monitoring and compliance or human resources. Retention and disposition of records will be largely determined by these functions but records series will still be used to define retention and disposition for records assessed to be archival or that needed special treatment. In addition, the UNC System General Schedule is currently being revised and updated to better fit the needs of the campuses.

The new schedules are expected to be implemented by the end of the year. Many of the participants were enthusiastic about the changes and believed they would improve records management. The new schedules are also expected to be more applicable to born-digital records, which may relieve some of the challenges in electronic records management. There will likely be new records management challenges that emerge during the implementation of new schedules as organizations and employees adapt to a new system. However, this study was not able to capture the impact of these new schedules and the new opportunities and challenges they will present.

This study provided an impression of how Chief Records Officers view records management at their institutions and what they perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. However, due to the exploratory nature of the study and the relatively small sample size, it is impossible to draw wide ranging conclusions from the study. Future research could be used to further understand issues such as employee training methods and electronic records management to identify potential solutions. Additional research could also examine the effects of the new functional scheduling system and see if it makes any meaningful changes in records management experiences among state

agencies. Public records serve as vital tools to promote accountability, administrative efficiency and historical evidence among North Carolina public organizations and it is important that we continue to work to improve the efficiency and success of public records management programs.

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## Appendix 1: Email Recruitment

Dear [prospective participant],

I am a Master of Library Science student at UNC-Chapel Hill conducting research about records management among North Carolina state agencies. My research is looking at how Chief Records Officer perceive barriers to good records management at their agencies. I am interested in learning about your experiences as Chief Records Officer at [N.C. agency] and I was wondering if you would be interested in participating in an interview about your agency.

The interviews would take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and will discuss records management practices at your agency. All answers will be kept completely anonymous and confidential. Interviews can be conducted at a location convenient for you or over the telephone.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please contact me at XXXXXX@live.unc.edu or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Hannigan

## **Appendix 2: Interview Questions**

### **Proposed Interview Questions: Chief Records Officers**

#### **INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS:**

1. Can you tell me a little about your institution and its records management responsibilities?
2. What types of records do you typically handle?
3. Does your institution have any special records management requirements?
4. What is your personal records management experience?
5. What would you say is the level of recordkeeping knowledge among employees?
6. How do you train employees in records management?
7. To what degree do you think employees at your institution value records management?

#### **POLICIES AND GUIDELINES**

8. Has your institution established records management policies and guidelines beyond the records retention schedules?
9. How are these policies and guidelines distributed to employees?
10. Do you believe employees are typically aware of these policies and guidelines?
11. Do you believe that most employees are aware of the agencies records retention schedule?
12. What do you perceive as your agencies' level of adherence to your records retention schedule?

#### **LEVEL OF RESOURCES:**

13. How often do you have contact with the State Records Center?
14. Do you feel comfortable going to them with records management questions?
15. Do you believe key leaders at your institution value records management?

#### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS:**

16. What are the three things your institution does best in regards to records management?
17. Where are three areas of records management you think could be improved?